

Outline for Class 3

The Three Vehicles

By Darrell Peters

Introduction

In some ways, each of us is very different from everyone else. All of us have different appearances, backgrounds, personalities, and likes and dislikes. But in one way, we're exactly alike: each of us wants to experience lasting happiness and avoid suffering, and we do our best to try to arrange a positive situation for ourselves.

There are two approaches that we can use as we try to establish ourselves in a situation that provides happiness and contentment: we can use worldly, material methods, or we can use spiritual methods.

The problem with taking the first approach, in which we try to control our material situation, is that everything changes. We've all had the experience that just when it looks like we have everything the way we want it, something happens, something changes, and our carefully assembled situation falls apart. It's been said that trying to control things outside ourselves to achieve lasting happiness is like trying to cover the earth with leather to protect our feet. We just can't do it.

But if we use spiritual methods to attain happiness, this is like wearing shoes to protect our feet, because it's something that's actually possible. We don't have to control everything outside ourselves; we only have to work within ourselves. This approach makes sense because everything we experience comes to us through our mind. So if we can work with our mind skillfully, using spiritual methods, we can produce a positive result.

The Vehicles

From the absolute point of view, Buddhism offers one path and one goal. But from the relative point of view, Buddhism offers a variety of methods and goals, to suit people with different levels of understanding and dedication. These different methods and goals are contained in three cycles of teachings called the three yanas, or vehicles, of the Buddhist tradition. The term "vehicle" is appropriate, because these can carry us from where we are to where we want to be. The vehicles are cycles of teachings that were presented at many different times and places, to many different kinds of people. Taken together, they provide us with a progressive path.

The Hinayana

In the first cycle of teachings, the Buddha presented the Hinayana, or Lesser, Vehicle. The vehicle is called "lesser" because the goal is limited to individual liberation, the cessation of suffering for oneself.

The Hinayana teachings provide a point of entry to the Buddhist path. It was in these teachings that the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, the foundation of the Buddhist tradition. Can anyone tell us what these are?

The Four Noble Truths

The Truth of Suffering

Suffering is an inherent part of life.

The Truth of the Cause of Suffering

Suffering is caused by our excessive attachment to a self, which has only a relative existence, but no solid, permanent, inherent existence.

The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

Peace is made possible by abandoning our clinging and afflictive emotions.

The Truth of the Path away from Suffering

This identifies the noble eightfold path, which is summarized by the slogans: do no harm; practice virtue; and tame the mind.

“Abandoning,” or Renunciation

The Four Noble Truths define the path of the Hinayana, which is “abandoning,” or renunciation. This can be a misleading word. Renunciation doesn’t mean we have to give up everything we have. Instead, it’s been said that renunciation means understanding that everything changes. If we see and understand that nothing stays the same and is always changing, we will also understand that clinging will inevitably create suffering, and we will view samsara as something that is harmful to us. These teachings emphasize turning away from samsaric life and toward the dharma.

Review of Hinayana Elements

Motivation

The Hinayana motivation is individual liberation from suffering.

View

The Hinayana view is that of the Four Noble Truths, which leads us to turn away from cyclic existence. This view emphasizes the emptiness of self, which is understood to have only a relative existence, but no solid, permanent, inherent existence.

Path

On the Hinayana path, we gain mindfulness through shinay meditation, and we cut attachment to samsara by contemplating impermanence, suffering, and the absence of self.

Commitments

We use vows to place restrictions on ourselves, in order to accumulate merit, and to provide an environment conducive to awareness and meditation. The Hinayana commitments are Refuge vows and monastic vows, such as those taken for the traditional Tibetan three-year retreat.

Goal

The goal of the Hinayana path is Nirvana, which is a resting place on the path to complete liberation.

The Mahayana

The teachings of the Mahayana, or “Greater Vehicle,” comprise the second cycle of the Buddha’s teachings.

This is called the “Greater Vehicle” because of a greater motivation. We have said that the Hinayana Vehicle is motivated by the aspiration for individual liberation. In the case of the Mahayana, the intention is to achieve personal liberation so that we can help *all* sentient beings gain enlightenment.

We have also said that the Hinayana emphasizes “abandoning,” or renunciation, in which we respond to samsara and the afflictive emotions as if they were harmful. In the Mahayana, the emphasis is on “transforming,” which refers to transforming the afflictive emotions.

Here, we look beyond our immediate situation and our own suffering, and we see that every other being experiences the same suffering that we do. We also understand that all beings are equal in wanting happiness and freedom from suffering, and that every being has been a loving parent toward us during previous lifetimes.

Instead of turning away from samsara and our afflictive emotions as if they were harmful, we transform them into positives, and we aspire to have unbiased love and compassion for all beings, which is the altruistic motivation of the bodhisattva.

How is it that the approach to samsara and the afflictive emotions changes from “abandoning” to “transforming”?

According to the view of the Mahayana, the teachings on emptiness of self and other show us that we have a very workable situation. We don’t have to avoid the world, because it has no solidity, permanence, or inherent self-existence. Rather than viewing samsara as harmful, we can see it as a substance that can be transformed in a beneficial way. Because our afflictive emotions have no solidity or permanence, we can transform them into their opposites. We train the mind to use the occasions that come up in our meditation and our life, and we transform them into positive thoughts, speech, and actions.

Review of Mahayana Elements

Motivation

The Mahayana motivation is the liberation of all sentient beings.

View

The Mahayana view is the emptiness of all phenomena, in which not only the self, but all phenomena are empty of inherent nature.

Path

On the Mahayana path, we include compassion meditation in our practice, and we practice the six *paramitas*, or perfections, of:

- Generosity
- Ethical conduct
- Patience/Forbearance
- Joyful effort/Diligence
- Meditative stability
- Wisdom

Commitments

The Mahayana commitments are the Refuge Vows, Lay Precepts, and the Bodhisattva Vow.

Goal

The goal of the Mahayana is complete liberation or enlightenment.

The Vajrayana

In the Mahayana teachings, the Buddha taught that everything was empty of inherent nature. But this teaching could lead to the mistaken belief that the goal of the Buddhist path is simply complete emptiness or annihilation. To avoid this mistake, the Buddha gave this third cycle of teachings, which show that mind is not just nothingness. Instead, it has the qualities of Buddhahood.

Vajrayana, the third cycle of teachings, is known as the “Diamond” or “Indestructible” Vehicle. This refers to the fact that on the relative, samsaric level, everything changes and is impermanent, but at the level of the ultimate or absolute, the essence is always present, never changes, and remains unaffected by the relative viewpoint. This essence is our Buddha Nature.

The Vajrayana teachings come from the tantras and are sometimes called the “Tantrayana.” Tantra means “thread” or “continuum.” This refers to the presence of Buddha Nature in all beings, from beginningless time until enlightenment is reached. When one achieves Buddhahood, the *original intrinsic luminosity of the mind* becomes manifest. This original intrinsic luminosity of the mind is also called primordial wisdom, the nature of mind, or enlightened mind.

Recognizing

So in the Vajrayana, we move beyond “transforming,” which is the practice of the Mahayana. In the Vajrayana, the emphasis is on “recognizing,” in which we experience the essence underlying both our interior experience and everything outside of us. We learn to practice sacred outlook, in which all forms are the body of the Buddha, all sounds are mantra, and the essence of all thoughts is wisdom.

Review of Vajrayana Elements

Motivation

The Vajrayana motivation is the liberation or enlightenment of all sentient beings.

View

The Vajrayana view is that Buddha Nature is present in all beings.

Path

The Vajrayana path contains the Path of Means and the Path of Liberation. The Path of Means refers to deity practices that directly transform our perception. The Path of Liberation refers to meditating directly on the mind. In both cases, the result is taken as the path, in a more direct and rapid approach.

Commitments

The Vajrayana path requires a regular daily practice, strong faith and confidence, and a stronger commitment to one’s teacher and lineage.

Goal

The goal of the Vajrayana path is complete enlightenment.

Conclusion

So, what does this discussion of the three vehicles have to do with us? There are a couple important points we can take with us.

First is that the Buddhist path is a progression, in which we begin with a limited motivation and the practice of shīnāy meditation. Gradually, we learn to broaden and deepen our view and aspiration, and bring the compassion meditation of the Mahayana and the deity meditation of the Vajrayana into our practice.

The second point is that in order for our meditation to be effective, we need to gradually bring the elements of the three vehicles into our practice. This means we try to loosen our fixation on samsara; benefit others as much as possible, through positive thoughts, speech, and actions; and learn to recognize our innate potential and develop sacred outlook.

Handout

“Transition to Perfection,” by Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche